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2021 Report from the Executive Director

It's already a cliché that in March 2020, we thought the pandemic lock-down would last a few weeks rather than a few years. COVID-19 changed everything, reinforcing the role internet plays in everyday life and the need for digital equity to ensure no one is left behind. NCF's work has become more important than ever, at the same time that we faced a lot of challenges in carrying it out.

Given that, in 2021 NCF worked to re-focus on the future as we found it.

For those of you that may not want to read the whole report, let me sum it up:

- We're happy to still be here 29 years later. Lots has changed but we're trying to change with the times while staying true to our roots. Look for details about our 30th anniversary to come soon!
- We launched cable internet services in addition to our DSL services to be able to offer speeds up to 1024/30Mbps. Given how crucial reliable internet service is, we continue to focus on strengthening our infrastructure and network resilience.
- The HelpDesk team of staff and volunteers is busy and growing to keep up with demand. Members seem generally happy with the support and service, and we appreciate our ongoing relationships both with those who have been with NCF for a long time and new members.
- Ensuring digital equity, including internet affordability and digital literacy, is central to our work and more important than ever.
- NCF is in a tough industry made tougher by the CRTC's recent wholesale internet pricing decision while we also wait for the CRTC to mandate an (affordable) way we can provide Fibre-to-the-Home services. We're working hard to help the government and other agencies make informed decisions.
- We posted a small surplus this year despite growing usage and other costs, thanks in part to sustainable pricing, donations, and grants.

For those of you who want the details, here are some of the main activities we got up in 2021:

Services and Membership

For a few years, we had contemplated adding higher-speed options through cable internet, primarily delivered over the Rogers network. The transition to so many people working from home, attending school from home, and using the internet as the main way people connected

with the outside world made this even more important. Some back-end changes developed during the last few years enabled us to add these new cable internet services more quickly than we had anticipated.

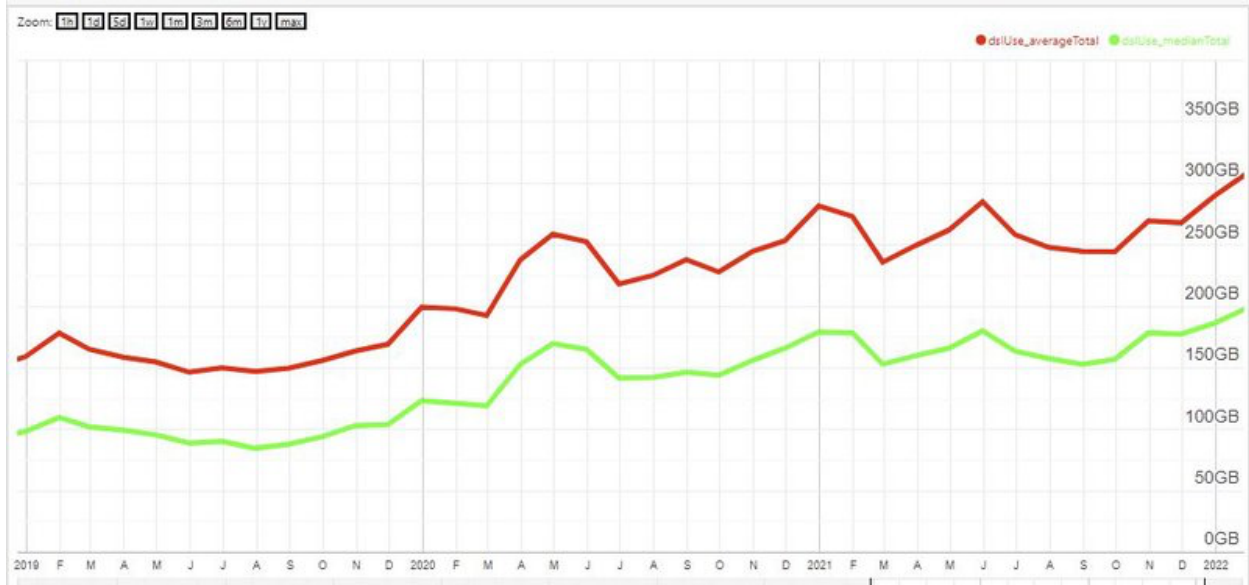
This work was led by Operations and Development Manager Nathan Medema with software development support from Systems Developer Dylan Ferris. Together the team offered a beta-testing program with more than 50 members and, once we were confident we could offer a high-quality service, officially launched it in the Fall just before Nathan moved on to new opportunities. We appreciate his help in launching such a crucial service and have continued to grow it. In 2022 this work will be supported by a grant to help NCF increase efficiencies and better market our services to those that don't know about our work.

For our DSL and email services we upgraded our network with new equipment and increased server capacity and network resilience, a major focus of the last few years. Thanks to System and Network Developer André Dalle for his work in this area.

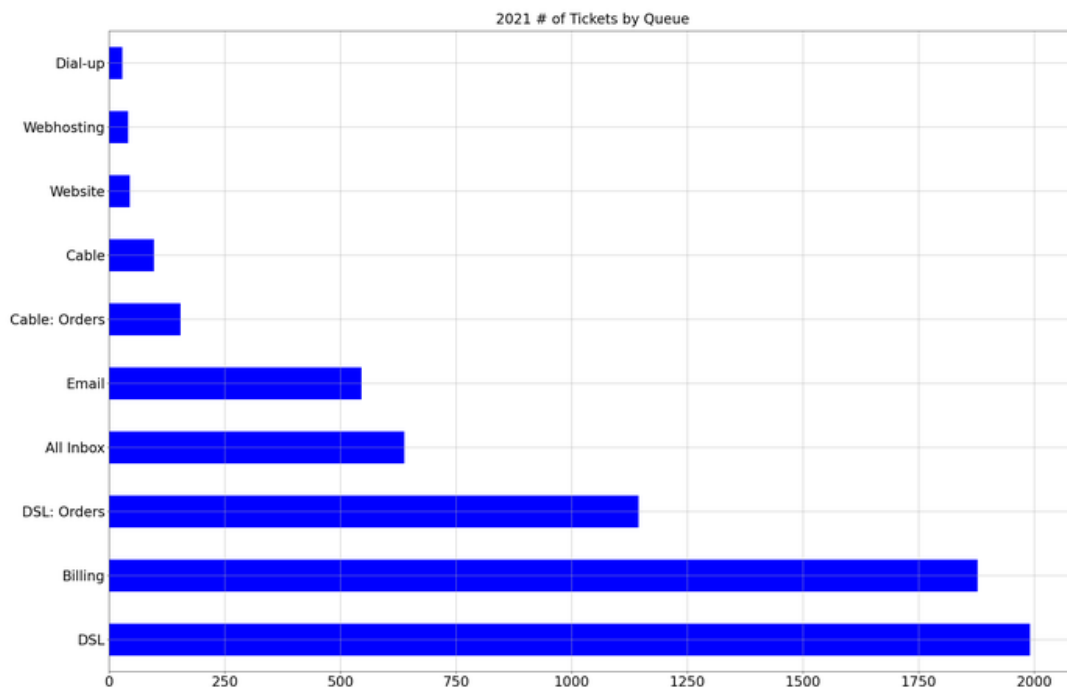
Unfortunately, the high wholesale costs we pay for our existing Fibre-to-the-Node DSL and cable services, combined with waiting for the CRTC to mandate wholesale access to Fibre-to-the-Home services continued to take a toll on independent ISPs as a group, and NCF was not immune to this. We lost ten percent of our DSL members and our growth in new cable members wasn't enough to make up the difference.

We began 2021 with 5454 members total, which includes DSL members and those using our internally subsidized Community Access Fund plan for Ottawa Community Housing tenants, and members who use our email and other services but don't subscribe to our internet. By December 2021 we had 5168 members, despite adding 64 new cable subscribers.

As it has for years, DSL usage continued to grow, though at a faster clip during the lockdowns of COVID-19 starting in Spring 2020 and with some seasonal variations:



In terms of HelpDesk support, we're proud to say our team of staff and volunteers handled 6635 support tickets from members and prospective members in 2021, continuing to navigate a balance of in-office and remote work. Here's a breakdown of that work:

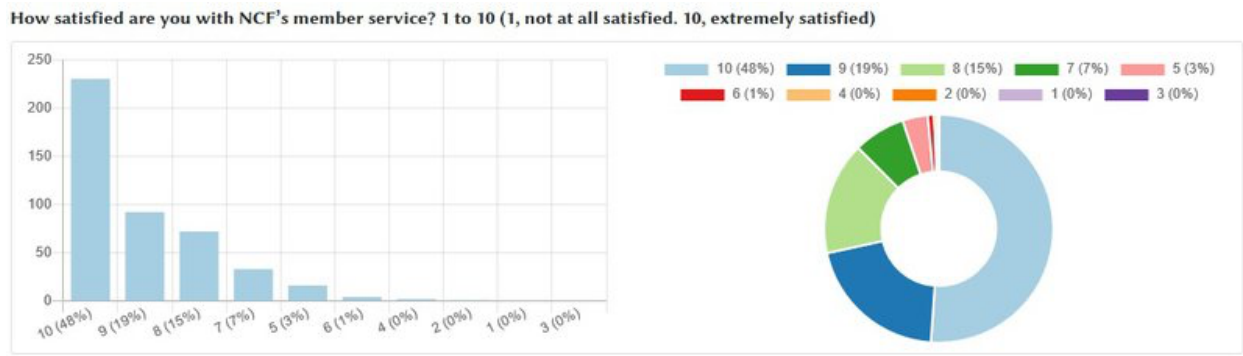


Andrés Carranco joined our HelpDesk in early 2021, transitioned to helping update our volunteer recruitment and training processes, and is now our Operations and HelpDesk Manager. Thanks to Andrés for his work to streamline our processes so we can increase efficiency without losing any of our service excellence.

Finally, in terms of member satisfaction and accessing member feedback, in December of 2021 we sent out a membership survey and were thrilled that more than 15% of members responded. Thanks to System Developer Dylan Ferris for designing an easy-to-use in-house survey tool that supports members' digital privacy while collecting crucial insights.

The Board and staff took these results into consideration when doing a Strategic Refresh to plan our activities into Spring 2023 and are looking to expand upon other opportunities for quick feedback in the future.

Here's a survey excerpt showing what DSL members thought of HelpDesk support:



Digital equity and Advocacy:

From the beginning, NCF has worked to ensure that everyone in our community has access to affordable high-quality internet that they understand how to use, while feeling safe online.

It has become increasingly clear, especially during COVID-19, that the digital divide doesn't operate in a vacuum: instead, it mirrors existing social inequities and makes them worse. If someone struggles to afford or use internet services, what other opportunities are they missing out on? This means some people and groups need more support than others to ensure internet affordability, digital literacy, online safety, and digital privacy for everyone.

Advocacy is our work to spread this message to all levels of government and agencies like the CRTC that play an integral party in ensuring digital equity.

Here's some of our work in these areas in 2021:

On March 21 2021, we participated in the [Affordable Internet Virtual Day of Action](#) organized by a coalition led by Open Media. Dozens of organizations participated and thousands

attended. We hosted a panel on The Human Cost of the Affordability Problem and encouraged members to [write their MPs](#), thanks to all who did.

After the major telecom companies appealed the [2019 CRTC wholesale rates decision](#), which would have reduced the very high costs NCF pays Bell and Rogers for service, the CRTC revised and reversed that decision in the May [2021 CRTC wholesale rates decision](#). The Commission chose to keep prices at the same high levels they've been since 2016.

In response to this decision, in June we participated in the [We Fight for That podcast](#) hosted by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre.

In August 2021 we filed a [petition](#) to the government asking them to reconsider and overturn that decision. Thanks to all the members that wrote letters of support.

In July, we released three major reports that focused on [digital equity issues during COVID-19](#), [rural connectivity issues in Ottawa and Eastern Ontario](#), and [community networks](#). This is part of our research to potentially build our own community network, leveraging our [existing partnership with Ottawa Community Housing](#). Led by long-time NCF staffer Andrew Martey Asare, who is now our Business and Community Development Manager, this was part of our [Digital Equity Ottawa work with the Social Planning Council of Ottawa](#), funded by [The United Way of East Ontario](#).

Thanks to NCF member Yvonne and Andrew for working with the United Way to help promote this work through a [video highlighting affordability and digital equity issues](#).

Financial sustainability: Pricing, Donations and Grants

In February of 2021, due to rising usage and costs, we raised the prices on our DSL services. As a not-for-profit we aim for sustainability and pricing stability for members, not huge profits. We are proud of our track record over the years and also offset some of our costs through member donations, volunteer support, and grants. It's not always enough.

In 2021 we were lucky to have continued our Official Language Support Program funding through the Department of Canadian Heritage, while also receiving support from the Association des communautés francophones d'Ottawa (ACFO) through their [Bilingual Ottawa Bilingue program](#). We also received employment support from the [Canada Summer Jobs program](#) offered through Economic and Social Development Canada (ESDC) and ESDC's [Youth Employment and Skills Strategy program](#), administered by the Social Planning Council of Ottawa. We also received many member donations, thanks to all those who contributed!

This helped us achieve a surplus of \$22,233 that can go towards organizational improvements and resilience.

Because of some small changes in the CRTC wholesale pricing decision related to reduced line technology costs and a small reduction in capacity costs dating back to 2016, we also received a retroactive credit from Bell for \$157,502.

Unfortunately, rather than being a windfall we can pass onto members, this retroactive credit helps cover some of the losses we had in 2018 and 2019 when we held firm on pricing in anticipation of the CRTC recognizing the current wholesale rates were unsustainable. That's not what happened, but we're relieved to have built back up our reserve fund to ensure NCF can continue to weather tough times.

For more information, the [audited financial statements](#) are also available in the AGM documents. Thanks to Marcil Lavallée for their work and for making our audit bilingual.

Staff and Volunteers

Thanks to all NCF's volunteers in 2021: David Ehman, Ian Gorman, Nader Hussein, Kai Keskinen, Will Robson, Michel Salvat and Michael Wong. We are always recruiting more volunteers for our HelpDesk, if interested please email volunteering@ncf.ca.

Thanks to NCF's Board of Directors who served in 2021: Board Chair Anis Hanna, Past Chair Chris Cope, Vice Chair Andrea Holland, Treasurer Emmanuel Adenlolu, Secretary Graeme Beckett, Second Vice Chair Peter MacKinnon, and Directors Lindsay Carreau, Michael Chan, Martin Dubois, Lauren Gardner and Majd Karam, who is serving as this year's AGM Chair.

Both Andrea Holland and Lauren Gardner are not re-running this year, we would like to thank them for their significant contributions to NCF and wish them well!

Thanks to NCF's staff who worked in 2021: Eric Adu-Boahene, Lily An, Denis Bedard Charette, Sully Beauplan, Andrés Carranco, André Dalle, Luke Deschenes, Younes El Bakri, Dylan Ferris, Fatima Nujhat, Katie Llorens, Tom Lumsden, Andrew Martey Asare, Nathan Medema, Nelson Silver Odutola, Shelley Robinson and Naftali Shani.

Moving forward

At the end of 2021 we applied for [Ontario Trillium Foundation funding through their Resilient Communities Fund](#) that helps community organizations recover from the effects of COVID-19 and effectively meet the changing needs of our community. We're thrilled that in the Spring of 2022, we received this grant and are starting work on it in early July!

This coming year in 2022 also marks NCF's 30th anniversary from when we were first registered on September 29, 1992. For our 25th anniversary we created a [history book](#) looking back at our roots and all that we had accomplished. For our 20th anniversary long-time volunteer Adam Hunt put together an [Oral History of NCF](#).

For our 30th anniversary we are looking forward to all that's still to come and will be in touch with more details for how you can get involved.

If there's anything you think is important for NCF to consider moving forward, be it a specific suggestion or a broader area of focus, please let me know by emailing me at shelley@ncf.ca. I will share all responses with the Board of Directors.

Thank you, as always, for being an NCF member,
Shelley